

ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN

Official Publication of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English

Vol. 33, No. 5

Urbana, Illinois

February, 1946

Published every month except June, July, August, and September. Subscription price, \$1.00 per year; single copies, 15 cents, or two for 25 cents. *Entered as second-class matter October 29, 1941, at the post office at Urbana, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879.* Communications may be addressed to C. W. Roberts, 204a Lincoln Hall, Urbana, Illinois.

A Semantic Approach to Reading

By MARY I. CARLSON

West High School, Rockford

There was a time, and that not so long ago, when the first of the traditional three R's was considered a relatively simple mental tool, easily acquired in the elementary school and thereafter requiring no further attention except in cases of marked retardation demanding remedial measures. Until recently there has been too little awareness that actually the ability to read is a progressive development from the lowest to the highest levels of experience; that reading must be looked upon as a continuously evolving skill, begun at the elementary level and going on through high school, college, and even the graduate school, to the maximum maturity of each individual, if it is adequately to serve his total personal, social, and civic needs. Gradually, perhaps, as the vital role which reading plays in shaping the lives of individuals and the destinies of nations becomes apparent, we teachers at the secondary school and college levels are beginning to realize that reading is our responsibility also; that instead of a simple skill to be taught in the grades once and for all, it is a very complex process made up of many specific skills to be acquired as the need arises, all eventually synthesized into an ability which will help people to understand and interpret the world about them and thus enable them to adjust themselves better to the bewildering problems and chaotic conditions which beset them in modern life.

So complex a problem as reading has many challenging aspects for the teacher of English, upon whom, unfortunately, the brunt of the burden usually falls. I shall touch upon only one or two of them. There may be danger that in our awakening con-

U OF I
LIBRARY

cern for improvement in reading we may be content to stop at the clinical level, where reading experts tend to become so engrossed in the mazes of technical devices and terminology that they forget the most important goals of reading. Everyone will no doubt agree that the first essential is the development of the skill necessary for the mere comprehension of the printed page. In that ability every normal student, not merely the noticeably deficient reader, in the secondary school and often in college and university, needs to continue to grow as he meets more complex material. However, it is possible that he may become increasingly proficient in this sense and yet not be a good reader in the sense that I wish to discuss the term. In my opinion, no matter how skilled a student may become in the mechanics of reading—that is, in grasping the literal sense meaning—the true purposes of reading have not been fulfilled unless he has learned to interpret and appraise what he reads to such an extent that his ways of thinking, his attitudes, and his standards of values have been modified. In my discussion I shall limit myself to that phase of improvement in reading which means growth in critical evaluation—in the ability to detect implications, hidden assumptions, fallacious logic, distortions of truth, half truths, and downright falsehoods.

In general, readers may be grouped in three classes. (Radio listeners and moviegoers may well be included in these classifications.) First, there are the credulous people who uncritically accept everything they read or hear. They are the sponge-minded, who through sheer mental inertia readily absorb anything and everything without discrimination; they have no desire or incentive to think independently. With a naive faith in the infallibility of the printed page, they feel that "it-said-in-the-book" is adequate support for any statement they may make. To challenge the dicta of writers or speakers never occurs to them. Of course, they become easy prey for unscrupulous political demagogues, high pressure advertisers, and propagandists of all kinds. Through the gullibility of such passive readers and listeners dictators and bureaucrats rise to power. I grant that this deplorable attitude is in part due to low intelligence, but I believe that probably the majority of readers are in this category because we teachers are content to stop our instruction at the level of mere comprehension of printed and spoken symbols.

At the other extreme are those who have built up a cynical disbelief in almost everything. Completely disillusioned, the

may even pride themselves upon their cynicism. Their adjustment to life and its problems is no more intelligent than that of the first group; but as they are relatively fewer in number, they need not give us too great concern here.

Then, happily, there are those who have been trained critically to examine and evaluate what they read or hear. Wholesomely skeptical, they keep an open mind until all relevant facts and data have been considered. They base their judgments, not upon heresay, prejudice, *ex cathedra* statements, or isolated instances, but upon the widest possible knowledge and consideration of all points of view. Through this open-minded quest for the truth they develop that discrimination in reading and listening which must exist in a genuine democracy, where everyone has the obligation of intelligent participation in government. One of the earmarks of such readers is an awareness of problems implicit in what they read and an eagerness to discuss them. Gaining perspective through reading, thinking, and discussion, they cultivate an habitual attitude of critical appraisal instead of the blindly receptive attitude of the first group.

Magic power lies in the spoken and written symbols we call words. Though less spectacular and dramatic, they may be as potent an intellectual and spiritual force, for good or ill, as atomic energy is in a material way. How can we train our pupils to use them, and to interpret them when used by others, in such a way as to insure an intelligent approach to the crucial problems which today face the world? In other words, what can we do to make our pupils the kind of readers mentioned in the third group?

I am well aware that it is always easier to state an ideal than to suggest tangible means for its attainment; however, I believe that it is important first to formulate a sound philosophy and then do all one can to find ways to implement it. Though one may never achieve the desired goal, one will at least have accomplished something.

To suggest methods to develop a good reader of the kind I have been describing is far more difficult than at the level of literal comprehension of sense meanings. But there are some things that can be done. One is to train pupils to take the proper attitude toward words. We can show them that words are merely symbols which stand for the non-verbal world of reality and experience; therefore what we call reading is really an effort to reconstruct this world which lies behind the symbols. It

is common practice for us to urge our pupils to increase their vocabularies and to suggest various ways to do so. Do we ever stop to realize what we are doing when we give them lists of words with the direction to find their "right meaning" and to be able to "define them carefully"? What is a dictionary definition but an explanation of a word with more words which usually give only its denotation and little if any of the connotations and metaphorical meanings which it may have in various contexts? Since the words explaining words are often no more intelligible or meaningful than the ones defined, the pupils' mental confusion becomes worse confounded. What is necessary is cultivation of an awareness of the non-verbal realities, the things which the words represent.

Some pupils develop great verbal proficiency; with fatal facility they re-cite what they have read in the words of the book, and sometimes even paraphrase them in acceptable synonyms, without any real thought or understanding of the objects, actions, or feelings behind them. Language should be a link with reality; it should fit life facts and experiences. "I value a man," says Holmes in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*, "mainly for his primary relations with truth . . . not for any secondary artifice in handling his ideas." To the extent that we praise and reward with high grades the parrotings of such glib verbalizers, to that extent we are encouraging our pupils to read unintelligently—that is, not to grasp the meaning that lies behind the words. Said the late Justice Holmes, son of the Autocrat: "The trouble is that men twist words, make fancy tools of them. Men should think *things*, not *words*. A word is not a crystal, transparent and unchanged; it is the skin of a living thought and may vary greatly in color and content according to the circumstances in which it is used." And in his book, *Language Habits in Human Affairs*, Irving J. Lee has this to say: "Existing educational procedures somehow generate habits of speaking as the primary function, so that students too readily speak without awareness that the first-order experiences about which they speak are unreachable by words."

It is imperative, then, to train pupils to see that words, strictly speaking, can have no significance apart from their contexts, and that the same word may have many different meanings according to the ways in which it is used. An exercise which helps to impress this fact is to ask pupils to use in sentences such familiar words as *stock*, *air*, *arm*, *base*, *fit*, *knot*, and the like, in as many different meanings as possible. In this way pupils come to form

the habit of trying to determine the meanings of words in their verbal contexts—that is, the rest of the sentence, as well as larger units of expression. While the use of the dictionary is not to be discouraged, it should be suggested chiefly as a means of verification of the meanings gained from considering the verbal context. Furthermore, for full comprehension, there are other contexts to be considered. Under what circumstances were the words spoken or written? What is their general tone or mood? Is the author or speaker communicating his thoughts in a satiric or humorous vein? Often the entire import of a passage may be missed because of failure to take into account its physical or psychological context. If students become aware that one word may have many different meanings at different times, or even different meanings for different people at the same time, because of dissimilar frames of reference, they will begin to realize the hazards of making casual assumptions about what a writer or speaker intends a word to mean; that there is no one fixed meaning of a word that can be relied upon always to serve. Because the use of metaphor, euphemism, and hyperbole is another source of confusion in language, pupils cannot become intelligent readers until they learn to interpret figurative use of words. The scope of this paper does not permit me to develop this important and interesting aspect of language.

In his work with the Army reading program, Professor Paul Witty found that it was possible to teach trainees to read up to fourth grade level in eight weeks when it was done in a context of meaningful activity related to the life which they were then living and with plenty of visual aids. The Army program of reading was based upon a language-fact relationship, not upon the acquisition of a vocabulary without referents in the GI's realm of activity or experience. We, too, can teach our pupils to become better readers if we constantly challenge them to check the concepts they are gaining against the things for which the words stand. Such checking is relatively easy with words which have concrete referents—that is, material objects, actions, or situations which can be pointed out or apprehended by the senses, such as *book*, *house*, *ironing*, *whispering*, *raining*, and the like. Words which designate groups or classes of objects or things, like *animal*, *mankind*, *citizenry*, *the electorate*, *the faculty*, offer some difficulty, for they are the beginning of generalization. The farther one goes in this process of generalizing, or abstracting, the greater grows the possibility of misunderstanding or of differences in interpretation. What assurance is there that people

mean the same thing by such words as *freedom, justice, democracy, truth, fascism, liberalism*, and other high order abstractions which they so glibly bandy about? To make pupils aware of the greater difficulty of understanding such words, one can give them a scrambled list of terms, *bovine, animal, Daisy, farm asset, cow, wealth, quadruped, organism*, to arrange in the order of their increasing abstraction, thus: *Daisy, cow, bovine, quadruped, animal, organism, farm asset, wealth*. Usually they readily see that while there is little danger of misunderstanding the concrete terms at the beginning of the list, the higher they go on the abstraction ladder, the greater the possibility of vagueness of meaning, deliberate or unconscious. Obviously in an advanced society there must be symbols to express abstract concepts; it would be impossible to think at higher levels without them. But pupils must be made to realize that it is possible, and common, to employ such "glittering generalities" without much significance; that they are one of the chief weapons of campaign orators to impress their hearers and to becloud the issues. No one can be said to be a good reader who has not learned to penetrate behind the verbal smoke screen which demagogues, propagandists, and sometimes advertisers use to cover up their selfish purposes or to hide the paucity of their ideas.

Since the reading of many adults is confined to current periodicals, it is vitally important that as students they be taught to read newspapers intelligently. I have time only to mention a basic reading skill here. They must learn to distinguish between language which presents verifiable facts and words which express inferences or conclusions. The latter have no place in news stories, which should be objective reporting of facts. The proper place for expressions of opinions or judgments is the editorial. If we can teach our pupils to detect the practice of some newspapers of permitting or encouraging their reporters and correspondents to use loaded words in order to give certain slants or biases, we shall be helping them to become more discriminating and independent readers of material that inevitably influences their attitudes on civic, political, and economic problems.

Pupils should also be shown the difference between the factual, informative language of a textbook or a scientific treatise and the emotive words so extensively used in literature and in material designed to influence people's actions. Is the writer trying to stir the reader emotionally? If so, is there valid basis for the feeling, or is there only mawkish sentimentality or sheer

melodrama? Particularly in the field of newspaper, magazine, and radio advertising, pupils must be made aware of the extravagant use of emotional language, to such an extent, in fact, that a gullible public buys not so much the products as the glowing words describing them. A unit of study on propaganda in advertising is one of the best ways I know to demonstrate the tremendous power of words cleverly manipulated to influence overcredulous readers and listeners. How people do "fall for" the connotations of elegance in "Palace" and "Waldorf" Hotel; of expensiveness and exclusiveness in "Bond Clothes," "Royal DeLuxe Sedan"; of loveliness in "Buena Vista," "Coral Gables," or "Laurel Heights" in residential developments actually quite devoid of beauty. Since there seems to be no way to escape this incessant barrage of propaganda, they must learn to build up an intelligent defense against it in the form of critical analysis of its claims.

I shall mention just one more point. It seems to me that one of our most important responsibilities as teachers is to check on the concepts of life and people which our pupils are unconsciously forming from various sources. To make clear the extent to which mental pictures created from general reading, movies, comic strips, cartoons, billboards, and advertising tend to become crystallized into almost automatic reactions and thus lead to distorted thinking and false concepts of life, it is well to ask pupils to give their idea, or the popular concept, of a politician, farmer, Jew, Negro, Communist, teacher, woman driver, banker, actor, and so on. Do these popular impressions, acquired in hit-or-miss fashion without much first-hand experience or observation or dependable vicarious sources, square with the world of reality? Are they thinking in terms of stereotypes which may apply to a few individuals of a certain group but are hardly representative of all? At the beginning of this semester I asked my seniors in English literature to write a popular stereotype of an Englishman of the cockney or the upper class. After we had talked over the probable misconceptions about the English which their papers revealed, we decided to set as one of our objectives in the course the gaining of a better understanding of the English as reflected in their literature, from *Beowulf* to *Mrs. Miniver*; for the class agreed that there could be no better motive for reading English literature than as a means of correcting some of the casually acquired but deeply ingrained notions of both Anglophobes and Anglophiles.

If some of the ideas I have given appear rather nebulous, I can only reiterate that I believe they represent one of the goals toward which we should be striving in developing better readers. I would go even farther and say that it is the most important goal of all. Most of the suggestions for achieving this goal I have tried out and found helpful.

Modern Trends in Vocabulary Building

By ELEANOR LUKENS

University of Illinois '46

The hickory stick banged across the desk top. "Today and every Friday hereafter," said the well-starched school ma'm, "we are going to take up the study of vocabulary. Mattie is passing to each of you a list of ten words which you are to look up in your dictionaries." Nancy, sitting in the fourth row, sighed and made a wry face at the girl across the aisle. She lifted her desk top and fumbled for the book. "You are to copy in your notebook," the teacher continued, "the pronunciation of the word, all the definitions, and the synonyms and antonyms. Do your copying neatly and correctly and hand your papers in to me at the end of the hour." Soon the class was bent over dictionaries, industriously "building their vocabularies."

The above scene, though an imaginative one, nevertheless may not be too great an exaggeration of some of the early methods of vocabulary building which modern educators are trying to break away from today. Traces of such methods are still found in classrooms of some misguided teachers who are conscientiously trying to give their students the advantages of an extensive vocabulary.

First of all, what *are* the advantages of a large vocabulary? Are they real advantages, or is it merely pleasant to impress people with long, high-sounding words? One of the most important phases of teaching the knowledge of words is making the students understand and appreciate what good it will do them. One of the earliest, well-tested theories on the subject is that vocabulary has a positive correlation to intelligence, and

therefore should be increased. Lou LaBrant, however, puts the theory to discredit when she reasons that the correlation lies in the method of testing, and that there is no causal relationship.¹ If there were, we could move low I.Q. pupils into the upper brackets by vocabulary drill, a process which would be gratifying but seems quite preposterous. Both vocabulary and intelligence tests are primarily language tests and therefore should, by their very nature, be highly correlated.

What, then, are the advantages of possessing a good vocabulary? Why are words important both to the individual and to society? Because they are our principal means of communication. They are, even with all their shadings of meaning, different connotations, and varied responses, the clearest, most facile, and almost the only means we have of exchanging ideas. Taking an international point of view, we may say that words are now even more important than ever before. There are increased communications between nation and nation, between race and race — communications which lead to strife or peace, misunderstanding or harmony in this newly united world, and directly or indirectly affect the lives of every individual. Therefore, analysis of word meaning is vastly important both to the diplomat who sends and receives international communiqués and to the average citizen who reads the world news in the daily paper. Furthermore, says Archibald Hart, words are the tools with which we do our thinking. They are the material out of which we make our thoughts. He observes that the accuracy, flexibility, scope, subtlety of one's thinking depend directly on the same qualities in a vocabulary. And not only are words the actual substance of our thoughts, they are — in both written and spoken form — the main source-spring for stimulation of our thinking.²

Importance of vocabulary study is further emphasized by the findings of various investigators that, as stated by Talbot Hamlin, "In every field, a large English vocabulary has been proved to correlate with success."³ Hart finds that a man's financial success is closely connected with the size of his vocabu-

¹ LaBrant, Lou L., "The Words They Know," *English Journal* 33, (Nov. 1944), 475.

² Hart, Archibald, *Twelve Ways to Build a Vocabulary*. (New York, 1930), Introduction.

³ Hamlin, Talbot F., "Latin for Successful Living," *Journal of Education* (March, 1945), 85. After years of testing in the Human Engineering Laboratory in Boston, where he is a director, Mr. Hamlin concludes: "The outstanding characteristic of successful men in any profession — the only one leaders in all occupations have in common — is a large English vocabulary."

lary.⁴ W. D. Templeman notes a positive correlation between vocabulary test scores and success in college (as measured by semester marks).⁵ Furthermore, Hamlin believes—and it is a belief we may well consider here—that word-knowledge comes before success instead of as a result. “Age and the experiences of life may contribute new words, but certainly do not explain in full the high vocabulary scores of business executives.”⁶ Would not this, then, prove the necessity for vocabulary training in the high school?

Perhaps training merely for future life is *not* a justifiable reason for vocabulary-teaching in high school. Let us look, then, to the aims of secondary education today. We find that one principal aim is to fit the student for his present life.⁷ In considering the fulfillment of this aim, we realize that effective study of vocabulary will increase the high school student's ability to comprehend both current and classical literature, to write more vividly, speak more effectively, and break away from the rut of everything being, “good,” “nice,” “swell,” “poor,” or “okay.” As Johnson O’Conner states it: “a limited vocabulary limits both comprehension and expression, restricting and confining the use of one’s powers.”⁸ We may accept the corollary that increased vocabulary will make one a more efficient member of his own society. Thus we find there are old and new reasons why there is now a general trend throughout the country to perfect techniques in vocabulary building.⁹

In the past two decades there have been several developments which have made us aware of our modern vocabulary deficiency. In 1923 C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards published a book titled, *The Meaning of Meaning*, which, L. H. Conrad says, started a new attitude toward words in everyday communication—an attitude which we shall find reflected in new trends of vocabulary building. The principle which those two authors presented in their book is that a word is only one factor in a total situation—its meaning is dictated by the situation. Thus a word doesn’t have a meaning; it acquires one from its surroundings.¹⁰ Besides this changed attitude, our knowledge of the words themselves

⁴ Hart, *op. cit.*

⁵ Templeman, W. D., “Vocabulary and Success in College,” *Journal of Higher Education*, 13 (April, 1942), 213-15. ⁶ Hamlin, *op. cit.*, 85.

⁷ Bossing, Nelson L., *Progressive Methods of Teaching in Secondary Schools* (Boston 1942), 21. ⁸ Hart, *op. cit.*, Introduction. ⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Conrad, Lawrence H., “The New View of Vocabulary Study,” *Virginia Journal of Education*, 36 (April 1943), 148-49.

most commonly used has been altered and extended recently through the publication of the results of two elaborate studies in this field: *The Teacher's Wordbook of 30,000 Words* by Edward L. Thorndike and Irvin Lorge, and *A Basic Vocabulary of Elementary School Children* by Henry D. Rinsland.¹¹ Statistics from Army-given vocabulary tests have probably also increased our alertness to vocabulary deficiencies.

Our modern way of living, say both Mirfield¹² and Hart,¹³ has had at least partial responsibility for young people not gaining strong vocabularies from wide and careful reading. Movies, radio, picture magazines and other pastimes have taken the place of recreational extensive reading, and have lowered the importance — at least, seemingly so to the student — of the written word. Increased high school attendance, due to compulsory attendance laws and higher standards of living, lower the general ability and eagerness for reading. Also the slow eradication of Latin and Greek from the school curriculum lowers the significance of the individual word.¹⁴ All these, plus the sharpened realization by educators, teachers, and observers that our school-room methods of vocabulary building are not sufficiently effective, are factors which engender the cry, "‘AMERICANS, AWAKE TO LANGUAGE NEEDS!’"¹⁵

People in the field of education, therefore, have become sharply aware of the need to change the methods of "the well-starched school-ma'rm." Increased experimentation and research have cut some old methods out entirely, left others still in a state of wide dispute, and discovered and advocated some new ones.

No longer will intelligent teachers assign long lists of definitions to be copied from the dictionary; unenriched dictionary use is out (for which I'm sure students will be duly grateful). Long lists of words for study have also been discarded; we shall see later that emphasis is placed on studying fewer words better. Neither will those lists be standardized, that is, made up either by the teacher years before or by someone miles away from the classroom. Lists will no longer contain outlandishly strange words; they will be tailored to the individual needs and desires

¹¹ Gray, W. S., "The Vocabularies of Children and Adults," *Elementary School Journal* (May 1945), 487.

¹² Mirfield, Josephine, "Vocabulary," *English Journal*, 33 (November 1944), 485-8. ¹³ Hart, *op. cit.*, 10.

¹⁴ The controversial position of Latin as it pertains to vocabulary will be discussed later.

¹⁵ Liebesny, H. J., "Vocabulary Learning Enjoyable," *Modern Language Journal*, 28 (Feb. 1944), 189.

of the specific group. And, as we have seen, our modern ways of living prevent us from allowing vocabulary to "take care of itself." Direct attention must be paid to words, but teachers will have to stop saying, "Today, and every Friday hereafter, we are going to take up the study of vocabulary," and will have to start creating a dynamic interest in words which will last throughout a lifetime.

Some methods of vocabulary training are still very controversial. To state them briefly here may allow teachers to be conscious of them, and to draw their own conclusions.

Repeated reference, often discrediting, is made to the use of the dictionary, formerly the prime instrument in vocabulary study. The decline in its importance may be attributed to the trend toward searching deeper than surface, or plain sense meaning of a word. A study by Sachs to determine the benefit of looking up unfamiliar words in a dictionary indicated that the benefit was somewhat doubtful.¹⁶ Teachers are decrying complete dependence upon the dictionary for any kind of continual word growth, but at the same time aim their methods toward developing the "dictionary habit." Thus we see that, though declining in esteem and importance, the dictionary remains, nevertheless, the most important and irreplaceable instrument in determining word meaning.

Study of the field of Latin calls, too, for much dispute. In many places Latin is slowly losing its firm hold in the high school curriculum, and its contribution to English vocabulary is often questioned. A study by D. B. Gragg to determine the use of high school Latin, French, and Spanish, and pre-high school English as a basis for understanding new, frequently used words points out that Latin does make a definite contribution.¹⁷ The question, then, is: is that contribution great enough to warrant the time and effort spent in a thorough study of the language? That is yet to be determined. Further research and study may eventually settle the controversy.

Related to the above argument is the controversial position of the study of word derivations, roots, etc., that is, placing the advantages of Latin and other languages in a unit which would be less time-consuming than the whole study of the language.

¹⁶ Sachs, H. J., "The Dictionary Habit and Growth in Vocabulary," *College English*, 4 (Oct. 1942), 60-2.

¹⁷ Gragg, Donald B., "The Contribution of High School Latin, French and Spanish to English Vocabulary," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 33 (Nov. 1944), 615-22.

and its uses. Dr. LaBrant claims that we must "help students judge the meaning of words by those previously known. Advise them to look a second time for familiar parts and then do some good guessing. Sometimes we do this by the root, prefix, suffix method."¹⁸ But later in her article she states that the study of prefixes and suffixes may be very misleading. When reduced to high school levels or presented to anyone not conversant with the history of Latin words, it is greatly oversimplified.¹⁹ Withers, too, disagrees with the theorists who state that all values of Latin, as they apply to "at homeness" in the English language, can be derived from a course in word derivation.²⁰ Such a study has values in rousing the interest of pupils, but the value of its more thorough study is, as we see, questionable.

The first cardinal step in modern vocabulary improvement is, investigators agree, adequate stimulation within the pupil. Absolutely nothing will be learned if a person doesn't want to learn, and unfortunately often the words "vocabulary study" are enough to put "thumbs down" right from the beginning. We have already seen the importance of a rich vocabulary, but the problem lies in getting students to see it and rousing their interest enough to do something about it. The great number of methods and devices suggested for stimulating a class is probably explainable by the fact that such stimulation is largely dependent upon the personality of the teacher.

Though the general trend is, it appears, toward direct teaching of vocabulary, some teachers maintain that the most effective acquirement of words is by indirect methods. In an experiment in her high school, Georgia Miller found that her students acquired a vocabulary high above their level (in the field) while working on a conservation project which called for extensive research and reporting, but no direct attention to word study. She concluded that, "Extensive reading by pupils having definite goals ahead is most conducive to vocabulary growth." Motivated by specialized interest and immediate need, they found this less painful and more challenging than the direct method.²¹ Lou LaBrant maintains that vocabulary can best be extended by providing a wealth of rich experiences: ". . . trips, handwork, discussion, reading. The teacher can make sure that words are related to things seen."²² It is indisputable that true vocabulary

¹⁸ LaBrant, *op. cit.*, 479. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 480.

²⁰ Withers, A. M., "On Reading and Writing," *Journal of Higher Education*, 16 (Feb. 1945), 75-8.

²¹ Miller, Georgia E., "Vocabulary Building Through Extensive Reading," *English Journal*, 30 (Oct. 1941), 664-6. ²² LaBrant, *op. cit.*, 479.

expansion for an individual is through his wide reading and experience, and the main virtue of these methods lies in the consciousness of words aroused in the pupil, even in activities undirected toward vocabulary.

In the field of more direct methods, some teachers suggest that an opening explanation and discussion of the needs of the students for word study will do the trick of proper stimulation. For the class of a sufficiently vitalizing person it probably would, though other teachers need more definite methods. One of the most valuable is an interestingly presented "Study of the history of our tongue and of individual words."²³ A scholarly study of origin, history, and relationship of words (that is, etymology), such as suggested by Hugh Liebesny,²⁴ may prove to be very stimulating, though to an older group than high school pupils. Mirrielees suggests a story-picture presentation of the origin of the language and its relationships to other languages.²⁵ Hart narrows his approach to the pursuit of synonyms, antonyms, and Latin derivations.²⁶ At any rate, the general method has been tried and found successful, and teachers may find it very suitable to their classes.

A third method is presented by J. E. Greene in a series of personal units which roused the interest of his class toward words.²⁷ The units were based upon short written assignments which led to the study of various types of words. In the first, which he called "Taking a Word Snapshot of Yourself," the children were asked to describe themselves as vividly and accurately as possible. The assignment led naturally to the discussion of such descriptive words as "burly," "ruddy," "prepossessing." Another enjoyable unit was based upon a personality scale on which students rated themselves and others. "Punctual," "tactful," "veracious" and similar words were analyzed as a result. Other units involved other types of words. Thus short units of maximum appeal were used to bring to the classroom more personal writing, more talk about personal experiences, ". . . introducing, thereby, the vocabulary which eludes us, but which needs better understanding and use," a principle advocated by LaBrant.²⁸ She adds that so-called "free-writing" is excellent for this as well as informal conversation.

²³ Mirrielees, L. B., *Teaching Composition & Literature* (N.Y., 1944), 152. ²⁴ Liebesny, *op. cit.*, 183. ²⁵ Mirrielees, *op. cit.*, 153-4.

²⁶ Hart, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Greene, Jay E., "Modernizing the Teaching of Vocabulary," *English Journal*, 34 (June 1945), 343-4. ²⁸ LaBrant, *op. cit.*, 479.

A fourth, and one of the newest and most important, method is to introduce students to the possibilities of shades of meaning, depth of meaning, mood, tone, connotation, and so forth, in a word. That is, introduce them to the study of semantics. Such an approach to the study of a word may prove to be as fascinating as watching the colors reflected from all the facets of a diamond. It will begin where the dictionary leaves off, leading to a true fascination — if well presented — for words. It can be, therefore, one of the very best means of achieving this thing we call "stimulation for learning" in students.

The mention of semantics brings us to the second cardinal step in vocabulary improvement, for semantics is not only a stimulation to the study of vocabulary, it is a whole method of study, and one which is quite well supported. Just what is the semantic approach, and what makes it so different from the usual dictionary system? H. I. Christ tells us that semantics begins where the dictionary leaves off. The dictionary gives only the literal sense meanings, not all the other kinds of meaning a word may have, depending on the tone, mood, or intent according to the context. If a word is taken out of its context, the definition looked up, then used in a sentence, distortion of meaning which is both ridiculous and misleading may follow. Semantics aims at "full meaning," which is the result of the totality of contexts.²⁹ Words vary so tremendously in meaning that the context is all-important. Note the factors causing variation which Christ lists:³⁰

1. The *literal*, or plain-sense meaning
2. The *mood* or feeling of the writer or speaker
3. The *intent* of the writer or speaker
4. The *tone* of the writer or speaker
5. The *attitude* of the writer or speaker
 - a. —toward his subject
 - b. —toward his reader or listener
 - c. —toward himself
 - d. —toward other people or other things

Meaning may carry:

1. A definition of a thing
2. A description of a thing
3. A statement of fact about a thing
4. A statement of opinion about a thing
 - a. —which may be an unconfirmed theory
 - b. —which may be a personal evaluation

²⁹ Christ, H. I., and Bellafore, J., "The Semantic Approach to Vocabulary Study," *High Points*, 26 (April 1944), 26.

³⁰ Christ, *op. cit.*, 28-9.

Is it little wonder, then, that modern educators believe we must go beyond the dictionary and take time to expand meaning?

We must teach pupils that words have more than a literal or defined meaning: they carry feeling overtones which make them rich and beautiful as in poetry but often also dangerous and misleading in arguments.³¹

This study in varied meaning and connotation may lead to an extremely valuable study of poetry, as LaBrant indicates above, opening to students a real appreciation of that type of literature. Of necessity the unit leads also to a valuable analysis of propaganda. Students will be made aware of the different response called forth by the choice of word. For example, the difference in these pairs of words may lead to entirely opposite opinions, though they have close literal-sense meaning:

Conservative	Reactionary
Progressive	Radical
Centralized authority	Dictatorial set-up

Sentences as well as isolated words show the necessity of examining connotation and denotation:

Cubs Trounce Giants 5-3	Giants Nosed Out 5-3
Nazis in full rout	Nazi armies withdraw to pre- arranged winter positions

Bias is also injected through the selection of details. "Through the selection of the good things of a person or thing, the writer or speaker can present a favorable picture.

A. He had apparently not shaved for several days, and his face and hands were covered with grime. . . .

B. Although his face was bearded and neglected, his eyes were clear and he looked straight ahead as he walked rapidly down the road. . . ."³²

Any number of valuable units of semantics in vocabulary — the influence of tone, levels of abstraction, black and white judgments, etc. — will increase the students' appreciation of the power of words, a main aim in vocabulary teaching.³³

Context, besides indicating connotation, denotation, etc., may also, through "context clues," help the reader to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Constance McCullough says:

If students could learn common types of clues, practice identification and use of them, and recognize a situation in which the meaning of the word might be any one of several, they would be more

³¹ LaBrant, *op. cit.*, 480.

³² Christ, *op. cit.*, 29-30.

³³ *Ibid.*, 30.

efficient in sensing meanings and would know when dictionary reference was necessary.³⁴

Teaching students to learn meaning from context is the natural way and liberates us from that stop to vocabulary growth, the idea that one is helpless without a dictionary if he meets a new word.³⁵

Thus we see that the study of words in their contexts treats them "... not as solitary entities ... but as factors in the stream of meaning."³⁶ And we see that such a study is one of the most important among modern trends in vocabulary building.

There is a trend in the choice of words to be studied that has almost completely won over all teachers. That is that lists are no longer standardized or gleaned from a study of the classics, but are made up by the pupils themselves from new words they contact and find a need for in their everyday lives. Moreover, emphasis is now being placed only partially on *new* words; the perfection of our grasp of those words we already have rightfully comes first. One may start a complete reformation by exploring the variety of meanings—as in the manner suggested in the previous paragraphs—of fairly familiar words.³⁷ The constituents of a person's "vocabulary" can be widely varied, as analyzed by Dr. LaBrant:³⁸

- There are:
- a. Words a person can use orally in one sense.
 - b. Words a person can use in many senses.
 - c. Words a person can use, perhaps define, but with a limited understanding which leads to confusion.
 - d. Words a person uses in reading but not in speaking.
 - e. Words never used in speech or writing, but understood when heard.
 - f. Words an individual says but which are not tested in tests (slang, profanity, sex words, localisms).
 - g. Words people write but don't speak.
 - h. Words spoken or understood when spoken but not recognized in print.

Therefore, if we know only a few phases of the words we already have, adding five, ten, or twenty new words a day will

³⁴ McCullough, C. M., "Learning to Use Context Clues," *Elementary English Review*, 20 (April 1943), 142. Miss McCullough lists and gives examples of several types of clues which would be useful in this type of study. She concludes, however, that "... a context clue provides an accurate definition of a strange word only if the clue suggests a single idea or, suggesting several ideas, is reinforced by a further clue which reduces the possible ideas to one."

³⁵ LaBrant, *op. cit.*, 480.

³⁶ Goldberg, Isaac, *The Wonder of Words*. New York, 1938. 296.

³⁷ Conrad, *op. cit.*, 148. ³⁸ LaBrant, *op. cit.*, 476-7.

only spread us thinner.³⁹ We must have complete study of a few words, then, instead of superficial acquaintance with many. Mirrieles lists and discusses five steps for complete study which, in one way or another, the teacher must eventually follow:

1. Disentangling like forms which have become more or less jumbled.

2. Sharpening and defining the uses and meanings of those words we already know.

3. Growing accustomed to the usual idiomatic combinations of certain words.

4. Gaining power from a knowledge of prefixes, roots, and suffixes so that the meaning of new words may be inferred.

5. Learning new words which are useful in talking, writing, and reading.⁴⁰

If these steps are followed, a new attitude toward words will result and pupils will strive to fulfill your request to: "*Know your subject; know what effect you want to convey; then make words your servants to carry out your desires.*"⁴¹

The purpose of all these methods of building vocabulary is no longer to acquire a few new, immediately applicable words, to increase the number of words answered correctly on a vocabulary test, or to enable a person to vaunt his language proficiency. No, the new purpose of vocabulary building is to instill a critical, thoughtful, and respectful attitude toward words which will motivate continued, enriching vocabulary growth throughout life.

³⁹ Conrad, *op. cit.*, 148.

⁴⁰ Mirrieles, *op. cit.*, 172.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BOSSING, NELSON L., *Progressive Methods of Teaching in Secondary Schools*, Rev. Ed. Boston, New York, etc. 1942.
- CHRIST, H. I., and BELLAFFIORE, J., "Semantic Approach to Vocabulary Study," *High Points*, 26:26-32, April 1944.
- CONRAD, L. H., "New View of Vocabulary Study," *Virginia Journal of Education*, 36:148-9, Dec. 1942.
- GILMARTIN, JOHN G., *Building Your Vocabulary*. New York, Chicago, San Francisco, 1941.
- GRAGG, D. B., "Contribution of High School Latin, French, and Spanish to English Vocabulary," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 33: 615-22, Nov. 1942.
- GRAY, W. S., "Vocabularies of Children and Adults," *Elementary School Journal*, 45:487, May 1945.
- GREENE, J. E., "Modernizing the Teaching of Vocabulary," *English Journal*, 34:343-4, June 1945.
- HAMLIN, T. F., "Latin for Successful Living," *Journal of Education*, 128: 85-7, March 1945.
- HART, ARCHIBALD, *Twelve Ways to Build a Vocabulary*, Rev. Ed. New York, 1939.
- JEROMA, SISTER MARY, "Assigning the Impossible," *English Journal*, 32: 569-70, Oct. 1943.
- LABRANT, LOU L., "The Words They Know," *English Journal*, 33:475-80, Nov. 1944.
- LABRANT, LOU L., "Vocabulary Growth," in Ragland, F. J., *Children Learn to Write*, 52-9, (Pamphlet publication of the National Council of Teachers of English: No. 7).
- LIEBESNY, H. J., "Vocabulary Learning Enjoyable," *Modern Language Journal*, 28:182-9, Feb. 1944.
- MCCULLOUGH, CONSTANCE M., "Learning to Use Context Clues," *Elementary English Review*, 20:140-3, April 1943.
- MILES, I. W., "Experiment in Vocabulary Building in a High School," *School and Society*, 61:285-6, April 28, 1945.
- MILLER, G. E., "Vocabulary Building Through Extensive Reading," *English Journal*, 30:664-6, Oct. 1941.
- MIRFIELD, JOSEPHINE, "Vocabulary," *English Journal*, 33:485-8, Nov. 1944.
- MIRRIELES, LUCIA B., *Teaching Composition and Literature*, Rev. Ed. New York, 1944.
- OGDEN, C. K., and RICHARDS, I. A., *The Meaning of Meaning*, Fifth Ed. New York, 1938.
- SACHS, H. J., "Dictionary Habit and Growth in Vocabulary," *College English*, 4:60-2, Oct. 1942.
- STEPHANIE, SISTER MARY, "Device for Building a Working Vocabulary," *English Journal*, 31:601-4, Oct. 1942.

- TEMPLEMAN, W. D., "Vocabulary and Success in College," *Journal of Higher Education*, 13:213-15, April 1942.
- VOSATKA, HELEN, "Use It in a Sentence," *Journal of Education*, 124: 202, Sept. 1941.
- WITHERS, A. M., "On Reading and Writing," *Journal of Higher Education*, 16:75-8, Feb. 1945.